

Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700-2000, what made Waterford furniture so special?

A lecture by Dr Claudia Kinmonth to the Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society

The Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society 2022 – 2023 lecture series continues at 8 pm on Friday, November 25th in St Patrick's Gateway Centre, Waterford (Eircode X91 YX61) when Dr Claudia Kinmonth will deliver a talk titled 'Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700-2000, what made Waterford furniture so special?'.

This lecture has been made possible due to the generous support of R. J. Keighery Antiques and Auction Rooms, Waterford.



Panelled settle bed from Waterford. Irish Agricultural Museum, Johnstown Castle. (Claudia Kinmonth).

In this lecture Claudia will illustrate the full range of Ireland's unique country or vernacular furniture, setting the scene of what was typical inside our rural farmhouses and cabins, until modernisation. This will include the best-known dressers and settles, as well as a wide variety of beds, seats, presses, tables and smaller furnishings. She will show how craftspeople resorted to using inexpensive timber, such as pine and driftwood, convincingly decorating it with 'grained' paintwork to imitate more expensive, fashionable woods such as oak, mahogany or satinwood. Furniture makers managed despite an acute

shortage of materials (Ireland was severely deforested by the eighteenth century), but their resourcefulness spurred ingenuity. Makers saved materials by designing chairs that had renewable legs, or dressers with replaceable feet, or others that were incorporated into partition walls. Many items were made from bog oak, straw, or even turf instead of wood.

In the poorest labourers' cabins and byre dwellings, people made up temporary sleeping places each night, close to the hearth, using rushes, heather or straw, to sleep communally 'in stradogue'. Others whose unlined thatched ceilings caused dust, dirt or drips to fall on them in rainy weather, built raised beds with integral roofs, to keep warm and dry, and avoid draughts. Large families often lived in small spaces. Demand arose for dual purpose furniture; such as fold-away beds, beds disguised as parlour furniture, or settle beds that doubled as worktops or contained their own bedding. This saved space in the absence of spare bedrooms.

Families subsisting on a predominantly on a potato-based diet, often ate directly from a round, flat basket, through which the freshly boiled potatoes were drained. This wicker 'skib' was placed on the cast iron pot in which they'd been cooked, and the family ate with their fingers, in a close circle. Conventional wooden tables were not necessarily given priority, but evolved from habits of communal eating, on small, low tray-like tables, that after being cleaned were hung up out of the way. Examples survive from the late bronze age and may eventually have evolved into one-legged tables that hinged down from the kitchen wall. These saved timber and freed up space in the kitchen, like so many other ingenious designs. Some 'falling tables' even doubled as window shutters or cupboard doors, once folded up flat.

All sorts of things were routinely recycled or repurposed. Worn out wooden cart wheels were dismantled so the spokes found new life as ladder rungs, the outer curved 'felloes' as cradle rockers, and the hubs became block stools. The butter box (in common use from the 1880-1960's), was popularly rescued and decorated and found new life as a fireside seat, or an upholstered sewing box. This sort of ingenuity, born from frugality, is inspiring to contemporary makers who are keen to support a circular economy, and provides an inspiring blueprint.

Furniture design was frequently regionally specific and influenced by local makers as well as economic circumstances. Of the small quantity of furniture that can be firmly linked to County Waterford with certainty, Claudia will discuss how this region differs. Waterford furniture is notably more decorative than equivalent pieces from other areas of Ireland. The comparatively decorative detail on Waterford case furniture suggests influence from foreign connections: probably introduced through the city's historic maritime trade links. The popular perception of creameries in Ireland associates them with cooperatives. However, most of the early creameries were privately-owned, and as late as 1920, almost half of all of Munster's creameries were still in private ownership. This was particularly the case in County Waterford where, of the 30 creameries established between 1886-1900, 28 were privately-owned. This illustrated lecture gives a detailed account of the initial waxing of the county's private creameries and their subsequent decline, with the last private creamery closing in 1937. There are fascinating stories behind many of these creameries and the people involved, such as the remarkable Dungarvan-based entrepreneur Annie Sheehan. These stories will be a key focus of the presentation. Ultimately, the late-arriving cooperatives came to exert control over the industry, with a lot of state support, bringing an end to this little-known facet of Waterford's creamery history.

Dr Claudia Kinmonth MRIA MA(RCA) BTechND is an art and design historian, whose Irish research started with her MA at the London's Royal College of Art, before working at the V&A and Sir John Soane's Museum. In 1993 the first of her books for Yale University Press, *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950* won awards and was followed by *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (2006).

Her work spurred three pioneering exhibitions on genre paintings, the most recent juxtaposing vernacular furniture (in Cork, Dublin and Boston College). The Royal Dublin Society awarded her their Library and Archives Bursary in 2018, the year of her election as a member of The Royal Irish Academy. Her latest book *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700-2000* (Cork University Press) won The Durkan Prize from the American Conference for Irish Studies (2021) and was a finalist for the Historians of British Art Awards. It sold 3000 copies in three weeks and was reprinted. Her chapter in *House and Home in Georgian Ireland* (edited by Conor Lucey) explored ‘Communality and privacy in one- or two-roomed homes before 1830’ and was published this month (with Four Courts Press). Her latest research looks at small butter makers using the dash churn, before 1880.



Dr Kinmonth is a Research Fellow at the Moore Institute, NUI Galway, and Research Curator (Domestic Life) at the Ulster Folk Museum, as well as curatorial advisor for several museums in Cork. Further information on her research and publications can be found at www.claudiakinmonth.ie.

*******FORTHCOMING LECTURES*******

The Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society has an exciting programme of lectures lined-up for 2023. Here are details of our upcoming talks:

27/01/2023 Dr Emmet O'Connor ‘*Waterfordmen and the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*’

24/02/2023 Cian Manning ‘*The miracle worker in Waterford: Helen Keller & Anne Sullivan's visit to Ireland, 1930*’